

## Introduction to 'Absences'

The origin of 'Absences' lies in the cutup of an old draft of a story I had abandoned in 2006, mixed with cutups from the same period of other texts. Unfortunately, I can no longer remember which texts, apart from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In June 2014, with no particular intention in mind, I began to put all these bits together, only to cut them up again because I wasn't happy with the result. I continued to work on them until something like a fragmented dreamlike autobiography emerged in the form of a sequence of sections made up of four three-line stanzas. The result still surprises, disturbs and draws me in each time I revisit this poem. (Note: Sections 1,2,3 and 5 first appeared in slightly different versions in *Stride* in July 2014.)

## ABSENCES

1

Years pass in the little room  
in the harbour town. The sea sparkles  
but you no longer feel the power

beneath its colours. You never speak  
to the sad girl across the hallway.  
Towards evening, the hillside

turns black, the streets are emptied  
and the sea grows still. Each morning  
you search the traces of your dreams

for a story, but they are no more  
than flat, unconnected pictures  
made by a child's crayons.

2

Just outside the broken window  
where a spider hangs, waves  
drag pebbles. From somewhere

in the night, there's a rich  
throaty singing. The breathing

of the sleepers on the floor

makes me lonelier still.  
I can hardly make out the face  
next to mine, just a blade of light

in the eyes. Don't wake the others,  
she whispers. Her lips taste  
of wine and smoke and sea.

3

The small happy boy in the photo  
is now the unstable man who  
crosses the road to the station.

All the pieces of the early landscape  
have been lost without powder  
or smoke in the interstices

of a dream where we grow  
unbroken. Your friend would  
understand, wouldn't she? But not

the part that is dead and frozen  
in a hotel room with a stranger  
with little stars sewn into his eyes.

4

I wait outside. He will not tolerate  
intruders. A smile is slashed  
across his face in the window.

Each heart will stop beating.  
There's terror in the simplest act  
such as crossing an empty street.

Once we ran through fields  
with the taste of sun. Now when you speak  
or look at me, I turn

to the distance inside my head  
as if someone else were waiting there  
in a window in another story.

5

The shape of your mouth  
produces its own truth  
unlike the weightiness

of your conclusions.  
You talk as if your life  
were that of another,

each embrace  
a marginal event  
instead of an alchemy

of blood in a dark  
warm place hidden  
behind the heart.

6

Your face is turned away  
in the half light. I do not know  
if you are starting to cry.

The empty window is black.  
It challenges me to touch it  
and enter, as if it were a dark sea

with all the secrets of a life.  
You are falling, as if being born,  
yet the light you emerge into

is nothing else *but* light, as if  
you had gone straight into death  
with no living or dying inbetween.

7

In this incompleteness, I make up  
my own story, begin over  
and over again without ever

entering the plot, hanging on  
to the privilege of not knowing.  
Where the window is scratched

is a greyness like an echo  
of where I've never been.  
To be far away without

knowing it, to lose yourself,  
to become alive in a country  
with a blue, unbroken sky...

8

You must have mistaken me  
for someone else. I want good news,  
not the feeling of sadness

brought by photos in out-of-date  
magazines in waiting rooms. I have  
a friend who says that all journeys

by definition are broken. The path  
loses itself in the trees. Faces  
fade, so that in the end you have to

invent new ones, made up  
of bits and pieces of those you knew  
and loved, or couldn't, before.

9

Because of the umbrella, I couldn't see  
her face. We crossed the square  
to the station. 'Find a job and place

to live – I'll join you.' An unreal  
world achieves its own consistency.  
You look out of the window

at the train on the next platform  
and for a moment you think  
you're moving. A breath of wind

passes and never returns. Often  
in the midst of things, I close my  
eyes and dream I'm falling.

10

You told me your dream  
without understanding any  
of the figures who moved through,

whose progress was measured  
in fingers of random rain.  
The dead stay caught

listening to those they love.  
Under the bridge, she ended up  
knowing so much, like how

to become imperceptible. What then  
is true mourning? The voyage  
turns out to be a return.

11

In what sense are our sensations  
private? We argued over who  
had got the better kiss. The story

was simple: how we slipped  
into different company and beds,  
as if tied into an old tale

of a search for shining gold,  
which, however faraway, assumed  
the shape of the moment.

The silent road stretching  
into the distance is happy  
without our footsteps.

12

We waited in the station all night.  
When I lit your cigarette, your hand  
trembled around the flame

which made its own brief country  
on your face. The distance from  
eyes to lips forms its own

neighbourhood. I was back where  
I started, between two worlds. At the border  
they asked endless questions.

They led me into another room  
while I tried to remember your name,  
pressed against something invisible.

Shadows are broken by patches  
of light. Known for their silences  
these ghosts you dream of

are not able to enter the landscape  
though each brings a fresh eye.  
You have the impression that he still

looks at you the way he first did  
when you sat by a train window  
pretending not to notice, tinkering

with a cigarette. If you knock there  
along the bones from the past, smoke  
will tell its own story passing through.